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1947: Decolonisation in the Shadow of the Cold War: the Case of French Cameroon

Abstract

The immediate post-World War Two period was marked by the consensus across the major French political parties that the retention of the empire was a vital component in the nation's bid to recover its role in the world. This consensus extended to the French Communist Party (PCF) that had emerged as the largest post-war party and participated in the tripartite governments of the IVth Republic until May 1947. The support or lack of support that the PCF gave to independence movements in the French colonies has been widely studied in relation to Indochina and Algeria. However very little has been published on its role in the UN Trust Territory of French Cameroon, where a widely supported independence movement, the Union des populations du Cameroun (UPC) sought to free the territory from French control. The focus of this article is on the evolution of PCF policy towards the colonies and on the relations between the UPC and the PCF in the crucial years 1947-57 that led up to the independence of Cameroon, through an analysis of articles in the communist press, correspondence between the two 'fraternal' parties, and reports by French authorities. The path that led to the suppression of the UPC in Cameroon must be understood in the context of the role of the other major players in this Cold War confrontation: the USSR and the US, the UN and the international community more broadly, and successive French governments.

Keywords: Cameroon; decolonisation; *Françafrique*; French Communist Party; Union of Cameroonian Peoples

Introduction

This year marks the seventieth anniversary of the co-incidence of the 'official' declaration of the Cold War and the burgeoning independence movements of that period.¹ Since decolonisation across the European empires was carried out in the shadow of the Cold War, all the parties in the many conflicts that ensued drew on the forces, allies and rationales thrown up by East-West confrontation to pursue their own interests and objectives. The European imperial powers would use the fight against communism as an alibi for opposing nationalist movements, for repressing pre- and post-independence forms of dissent and for tarnishing attempts at indigenous forms of socialism. Leaders of nationalist movements negotiated their independence not only in relation to the colonial power but to the range of agents that dominated the post-World War Two years: the major players of the Eastern and Western blocs, the non-aligned movement, and the UN. The latter was charged with particular oversight of the

¹ Initially used in a speech by the American political advisor Bernard Baruch, the term achieved media prominence in Lippman, 1947, and was enshrined in the Truman Doctrine of the same year.

Trust Territories, including Togo and Cameroon that had been consigned to French governance. When in 1948 the *Union des Populations du Cameroun* (UPC) was formed with the aim of bringing about the independence of the territory, it was therefore confronted not only with negotiating a rupture with a colonial power determined to cling on to its empire, but with an international situation that propelled it into the maelstrom of Cold War rivalries and alignments.

The tortuous path of many colonies towards independence was marked by the choice outlined by Frantz Fanon between a gradualist process of greater autonomy granted by the colonial powers: ‘reform’, or a revolution to overthrow them. In *Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon notoriously advocated the necessity of violent revolution against the colonial power, in order to throw off the mentality and culture that had imprisoned the colonised. The colonised native ‘finds his freedom in and through violence’ he wrote; his violence responds to the violence of the coloniser, it is a dialectical necessity that binds the people together, delivering them from ‘despair and inaction’ (Fanon 1961, p. 85, p. 93). In the case of the UPC, the party campaigned for reform for seven years within the (limited) democratic processes open to it, and relying on the country’s special status as a UN Trust Territory. After it was banned by the French in 1955, it was compelled either to abandon the radical form of independence that it advocated or to take up arms – it chose the latter path and there ensued a protracted military confrontation with French and Franco-Cameroonian forces between 1956 and 1971. A brutal war that put into practice the strategies developed by the French theorists of counter-insurgency, it resulted in military and civilian casualties in the scores of thousands.² The legacy of this conflict is still relevant today to an understanding of the relationship between France and Cameroon, which, with France’s other former sub-Saharan colonies, forms part of a system of political and economic interdependence sometimes pejoratively termed *Françafrique*.

Remarkable in the immediate post-war period was the consensus across the major French political parties that the retention of the empire was a vital component in the nation’s bid to recover its role in the world and its stature as a great power. This consensus extended to the French Communist Party (PCF) that had emerged as the largest post-war party and participated in the tripartite governments of the IVth Republic until May 1947. 1947 was a momentous year for the French empire, marking the start of the First Indochina War, from December 1946, the Madagascar rebellion of 1947 and the crystallisation of the post-World War Two independence movement in French Cameroon. These movements would be the object of violent repression: in the case of Madagascar perhaps 100,000 were killed in a military response that was ‘staggeringly brutal, a portent of the more enduring colonial violence to come’ writes Martin Thomas (2007, p. 140). The repression in Madagascar took place under governments supported by the communists and with communist ministers until May 1947, when the PCF left government, not over the colonial question, however, but over support for a strike at the main Renault plant.³

The support or lack of support that the PCF gave to post-war independence movements in the French empire has been widely studied in relation to Indochina and Algeria. However very little has been published on its role in the UN Trust Territory of

² For an account of the counterinsurgency tactics deployed in Cameroon, see Rechiniewski 2014.

³ While not questioning the legitimacy of the military action in Madagascar, the PCF did condemn the lifting of the parliamentary immunity of the Madagascan deputies, who were charged, on the flimsiest evidence, with fomenting the rebellion (Madjarian 1977, p. 229).

Cameroon where a widely supported independence movement sought to free the territory from French control. After a brief outline of the evolution of PCF policy towards the French colonies, this article focuses on relations between the UPC and the PCF in the crucial years 1947-57 that led up to independence, through an analysis of articles that appeared in *L'Humanité* and *Cahiers du communisme*, correspondence between the two 'fraternal' parties, and reports by French authorities. The path that led to conflict in Cameroon must also be understood in the context of the role of the other main players in this Cold War confrontation: the USA and the USSR, the UN and the international community more broadly, and successive French governments.

The Evolving Policy of the PCF towards the Colonies

In 1920 the new party subscribed to the 21 conditions of adherence to the Third International; the eighth enjoined communist parties to support all movements of emancipation in the colonies, the expulsion of the imperialists, and agitation within the imperial armies. The policy was heavily influenced by Lenin's *Imperialism: the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1917) that associated the revolt of colonised peoples with that of the metropolitan working classes in the struggle against capitalism. Although the party created in 1924 the Intercolonial Union, which denounced colonialism with a vehemence unusual at the time, it was criticised by the fifth congress of the Comintern in June 1924 for being too slow to implement an anti-imperialist policy (Madjarian 1977, p. 32). However during the Rif war of 1925—the revolt of l'Emir Abdel-Krim against Spain, the latter supported by French troops—the PCF took exemplary action, organising demonstrations and strikes and encouraging French soldiers to fraternise with the Riffians. This was the high point in PCF support for anti-imperialism; the Intercolonial movement would splinter into individual national independence movements in the following years and party policy would be largely determined by the immediate pressures of the international situation and defence of the interests of the Soviet Union, the home of Revolution. The PCF's colonial policy largely followed the *revirements* of Stalin's doctrine: the doctrine of 'class against class,' developed in 1926-27, that determined that communists could not support the demands for independence of the 'national bourgeoisie' in the colonised countries; and the abandonment of this policy in 1934-5 when, in the face of the rise of fascism in Europe, the Comintern acknowledged the necessity of collaboration with anti-fascist forces. In this context the PCF gave priority to preventing French colonies from falling under the sway of the fascist powers and their links to France being weakened by independence movements. This position was illustrated in the editorial by Paul Vaillant-Couturier published in *L'Humanité* in August 1936, condemning the nationalist agitation in North Africa as a tool of Hitler:

Qui ne veut pas voir l'ampleur de l'opération hitlérienne en train de se dérouler contre la France, des Pyrénées aux côtes de l'Algérie, qui favorise les factieux et leurs machinations de guerre civile en Afrique du Nord, agit en véritable traître à son pays [Anyone who refuses to recognise the extent of the operation that Hitler is rolling out against France, from the Pyrenees to the coasts of Algeria, which encourages the seditious and their plotting of civil war in North Africa, is acting as a veritable traitor to his country] (Vaillant-Couturier 1936, p. 1).

Summarising the PCF's colonial policy in the interwar years, Claude Liauzu writes: 'De l'activisme du Rif à la quasi-liquidation du travail colonial (...) la brutalité des changements d'orientation et la faiblesse des oppositions qu'ils suscitent posent le

problème de la réalité de l'anticolonialisme dans le Parti communiste [from the activism of the Rif to the quasi-liquidation of colonial work (...) the brutality of the changes of direction and the weakness of the opposition they provoke pose the problem of the reality of anti-colonialism in the communist party]' (Liauzu 1982, p. 45).

A review of the articles about Cameroon in *L'Humanité* in the interwar years reveals that the territory garnered only a few, usually brief, references each year.⁴ In the issue of 16 August 1926, for example, Lamine Senghor denounced the conditions in which the populations of West and Equatorial Africa lived and worked, as responsible for the depopulation of these territories; he cited forced labour in the forest industry in Cameroon as one example of this exploitation (Senghor 1926, p. 4). The period in which the territory received the most sustained attention in the newspaper was in the years 1937-39 (43 items), when the possibility had been raised by the French prime minister, Léon Blum, of the return of the League of Nations territories mandated to France, Togo and Cameroon, to Germany.⁵ The paper was deeply opposed to such restitution. In March 1939 it cited with apparent approval the lecture given by Louis Pasteur Vallery-Radot, comparing French colonisation favourably to that of the Germans. Vallery-Radot concluded: 'les Camerounais, peuple de plus d'un million d'habitants, réclament le droit de rester des hommes, égaux aux autres hommes, sous la protection de leur deuxième patrie, la France [the Cameroonians, with a population of more than a million inhabitants, demand the right to remain men, equal to other men, under the protection of their second fatherland, France]' (Vallery-Radot 1939, p. 4).

The PCF and the Post-War French Empire

The post-war colonial policy that would be adopted by the PCF was laid out in the editorial published in *L'Humanité* on 30 August 1944, which protested the American proposal to establish international oversight of colonies and federated territories. This proposal, wrote Marcus Magnien, would be 'contraire à la souveraineté des nations [contrary to national sovereignty]':

la France ne pourrait accepter quelque disposition que ce soit qui porterait atteinte à sa souveraineté de grande puissance, ni à son droit strict d'administrer les territoires d'outre mer dont elle a la charge dans le sens de l'émancipation des peuples qui les habitent, ni, surtout, à son droit de les défendre contre toute visée impérialiste [France could not accept any arrangement whatever that would threaten her sovereignty as a great power, nor her absolute right to administer the overseas territories entrusted to her charge, with the aim of emancipating their inhabitants, nor, above all, her right to defend them against any imperialist designs] (Magnien 1944, p. 2).

⁴ Results of a search of the digitised issues of *L'Humanité* on the bnf Gallica website, between 1919 and 1939. While not all the issues are available for every year, a large majority are, which allows an assessment of the tendencies in the attention paid to the territory.

⁵ In discussions with Hjalmar Schacht, Hitler's Minister of Economics, in Paris in August 1936, Blum indicated his willingness to negotiate the return of these colonies to Germany in return for a disarmament convention (Steiner 2011, pp. 258-59).

The only comparable period of coverage of Cameroon was in the years 1914-1916, when the paper reported extensively on the campaign to capture the colony from the Germans during World War One (44 items). This was of course before the 1920 formation of the PCF.

This passage offers an excellent summary of the main lines of the PCF's post-war policy towards the colonies: the aim to re-establish France's status as a great power; the survival of France's civilising mission in the colonies, with emancipation, albeit communist emancipation, imposed from above; the justification of 'defending' the colonies from 'imperialist designs,' clearly designating the Americans.

The article by Henri Lozeray in *Cahiers du communisme*, April 1945, drew on the writings of Stalin, 'le plus grand théoricien de la question nationale [the greatest theoretician of the national question]', to call into question the absolute right of colonised peoples to decide their own destiny. Lozeray argued that this right must be balanced by the global necessity of the fight against imperialism, by which once again is meant American imperialism. The fight against the 'Trusts' in which the 'French nation' is engaged will bring progress to the colonies, he wrote. Moreover, because of past exploitation, the colonies are 'absolument incapables d'exister économiquement et par conséquent politiquement, comme nations indépendantes [totally incapable of surviving economically and therefore politically as independent nations]' (Lozeray 1945, p. 76).

Following de Gaulle's 1944 speech in Brazzaville promising a new status to the colonies and their inhabitants, France sought a form of association within which to retain control of her overseas possessions, while allowing a modicum of democratic participation. The *Union française* (1946-58) was the attempt to find an accommodation between the growing demands for reform in the colonies, and the economic and geopolitical interests of the metropole. Under the determined campaigning of Félix Houphouët-Boigny and other African leaders forced labour was abolished; certain rights, such as that of forming trade unions, were accorded, and electoral colleges set up to send representatives to the National Assembly—although these were elected through the profoundly undemocratic separate college system for Europeans and the colonised. The UN Trust territories of Togo and Cameroon were included in the Union as 'associated territories', with similar rights of representation as the colonies.

The PCF broadly supported the efforts, including military, to re-establish French hegemony within the framework of the Union. The *Programme d'action gouvernementale*, published in the *Cahiers du communisme* in November 1946, defended the necessity of the Union in the interests of the 'renaissance' of France and also of the colonised peoples whose economic, social and political situation would improve through the '[c]onsolidation de l'union libre et confiante des populations et des peuples d'Outre-mer avec le peuple de France dans le cadre d'une collaboration fraternelle au sein de l'Union française [consolidation of the free and confident union of the overseas populations and peoples with the people of France in the framework of a fraternal collaboration within the French Union]' (p. 1102). Raymond Barbé, who undertook a penetrating critique of colonialism in an article in *Cahiers du communisme* in July 1946, also did not question the 'role civilisateur' that France was called on to play but which, he argued, had been thwarted by the brutality of colonial exploitation (Barbé 1946, p. 572).

Despite fine words and sentiments, it is clear that the PCF did not envisage the evolution of the colonies towards independence but rather a federative system that would see the colonies develop social and political rights within the framework of the Union. The party's justification was two-fold: that, in view of the economic and political

backwardness of the colonies, their hope of emancipation depended on the victory of the French working class which, in transforming the French nation, would bring liberation to the colonies in the form of socialism; and the fear that behind the agitation for independence lay the manoeuvrings of British and above all American imperial interests: 'From the Communist perspective, Africans' lack of experience would make them easy prey to American imperialism and international capitalism' (Schmidt 2013, p. 18). While many of the African elite – the *évolués* – who were brought within the democratic process by the granting of limited voting rights and representation in the territorial and National Assembly, accepted gradualist evolution within the framework of the Union, there was also significant resistance in some colonies: the rebellion in Madagascar in 1947, the Algerian War 1954-62 and the little-known war in Cameroon between 1956 and 1971.

Cameroon's Path to Independence

Cameroon, originally a Portuguese, then a Dutch, and from 1884 a German colony was taken over by the French in 1916. It did not have the same status as other sub-Saharan French colonies since it was mandated to France, along with Togo, by the League of Nations in 1922. The mandate saw the former German colony of Kamerun divided between France and Britain: four-fifths of the territory were given to the French; the remaining land to the west, which contained half the total population, was given to the British. In the interwar years, French businesses, administrators and colonists settled in the French section and established large cocoa, rubber, banana, and palm oil plantations. By 1956 there were some 17,000 white settlers in a population of some 3 million (Joseph 1974, p. 670). Despite its status as a League of Nations mandated territory, it was governed in a similar way to other French colonies: native Cameroonians were administered from 1924 by the *code de l'indigénat* that led to fines or imprisonment of thousands each year for a broad range of 'administrative' offences. Infrastructure was built through deadly systems of forced labour that only intensified during World War Two, as production was ramped up to support the Free French forces (Madjarian 1977, p. 47).

After the war it became a United Nations Trust Territory, with France and Britain entrusted to:

promote the political, economic, social, and educational advancement of the inhabitants of the trust territories, and their progressive development towards self-government or independence as may be appropriate to the particular circumstances of each territory and its peoples and the freely expressed wishes of the peoples concerned.⁶

France, however, considered the possession of Cameroon integral to her African empire, including it in the various post-war forms of Francophone communities, as an associated territory in the *Union française* and as a member of the Central Africa franc zone (1945 to the present), ensuring close economic and political ties with France. Despite these efforts to integrate Cameroon into the French sphere of influence, from the late 1940s political activism in favour of independence developed and crystallised with the founding in 1947 of the *Rassemblement camerounais* (Racam), succeeded in

⁶ Article 76, chapter XII of the UN Charter, concerning the International Trusteeship System. The Trusteeship Council could receive petitions from Trust Territories and sent periodic missions to report on the progress of the territories.

1948 by the *Union des Populations du Cameroun*, (UPC), a title that clearly represented an attempt to group together under one banner the numerous and disparate ethnic and religious groups that existed in the country. The extent to which the UPC represented the population as a whole, rather than certain groups in particular (notably the Bamiléké), will be the subject of differing interpretations throughout its existence, as will the question of its allegiance to international communism. In its early years the UPC was stronger in the South, which was more urbanised and less traditional, and less dominated by the great chiefs of the North; Achille Mbembe argues, however, that its principal demands, for independence within ten years and reunification of the British and French territories, ‘exercised cultural hegemony in the country’ in the decade 1950-60 (Mbembe 1986, p. 45). Seven years after its founding, in 1955, the UPC controlled 460 village or neighbourhood committees and the French estimated that they had 100,000 members and sympathisers, more by far than any other party (Terretta 2014, p. 98), particularly on the coast and in central, south and west Cameroon, among the Bamiléké and Bassa. The party published the papers *La Voix du peuple*, *Lumière* (bi-monthly), *L’Étoile* (weekly) and *La Vérité* (for youth) and had active youth and women’s wings. It sought to win over opinion in Cameroon by democratic means until that possibility was precluded by the banning of the party in July 1955.

The Origins, Ideology and Objectives of the UPC

After a French decree of 7 August 1944 allowed the creation of trade unions in the colonies, several communist militants and members of the *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT), the PCF-affiliated trade union, set up study circles in Yaoundé and Douala, *cercles d’études sociales et syndicales*, addressing both political and organisational issues (Deltombe et al. 2011, pp. 40-1). Attendees included the historic leader of the UPC, Ruben Um Nyobé, but also others who were later to take a moderate or even conservative line in relation to independence. The Cameroonian workers took with great enthusiasm to the establishment of trade unions in the different sectors of the economy, which federated in December 1944 as the *Union des syndicats fédérés du Cameroun* (USSC). The USSC was spied on, its members the victims of abusive transfers between posts (a form of internal exile away from the centres of political organisation), or even dismissal (Atangana 1998, pp. 49-50) but the tight organisation and activism of USSC led to its quasi monopoly of trade union activity by the end of the 1940s. From this kernel and the *Rassemblement camerounais*, the UPC was born as a political party in April 1948; Ruben Um Nyobé became Secretary General in November. The UPC became the Cameroonian section of the *Rassemblement démocratique africain* (RDA) shortly after its formation, when the RDA was most closely aligned with the PCF, but was expelled from the RDA in 1950 because of the Cameroonian party’s insistence on demanding total independence from France.

In his prolific writings and interventions in local and international fora, Um Nyobé consistently denied ideological or political affiliation with the international communist movement and presented the UPC as a purely anti-colonial movement of national liberation that crossed class lines: ‘il ne s’inspire d’aucune idéologie politique. Il ne fait qu’exprimer les aspirations nationales de la population (...) l’UPC n’est ni pro-communiste, ni anti-communiste, c’est un mouvement indépendant dirigé contre le colonialisme [it is inspired by no political ideology. It only expresses the national

aspirations of the population (...) the UPC is neither pro-communist nor anti-communist, it is an independent movement directed against colonialism].⁷ He based his arguments for independence on the special status of Cameroon as a Trust Territory and on the discourse of human rights enshrined in the 1948 declaration of the UN, the body charged with overseeing the governance and eventual liberation from tutelle of Cameroon. The UPC initially placed great hope in the capacity and willingness of the UN to respond to their demands: they sent delegations to address the UN assemblies and many thousands of petitions were submitted by UPC members and also by ordinary Cameroonians.⁸ In 1952 Ruben Um Nyobé put the UPC demands to the UN Assembly: a rapid move to independence and reunification of the French and British sectors, demands he reiterated in 1953 and 1954. By April 1955, as the repressive measures against them intensified, the UPC and its affiliated associations issued a Joint Proclamation demanding immediate independence, elections for a constituent assembly before the end of the year and the establishment of an African executive committee that would serve as a provisional government. A 'declaration of war' writes Thomas Sharp (2013, p. 84) that no doubt contributed to the banning of the party in July 1955, although the immediate reason given was the conflict of May 1955 between supporters of the UPC and the authorities.

Relations between the UPC and PCF

In the early years of the UPC, the late 1940s and early 1950s, the policy of the PCF towards the colonies reflected the co-incidence of national priorities of nation-rebuilding with the USSR's objective of limiting the spread of American imperialism, even if that meant leaving the French colonies under France's control. The PCF and the CGT were, however, as we have seen, active in promoting the education and training of union and political figures, including Ruben Um Nyobé, who would become highly significant players in the political life of the country. In the crucial years 1954-55, as the party came under increased pressure, the UPC turned to the 'fraternal party' for support in its confrontation with the French authorities and its attempt to gain wider international standing. An undated letter written by the *comité directeur* of the UPC in reply to the invitation to attend the XIIIth congress of the PCF, held at Ivry-sur-Seine in June 1954, lists the support that the French party had given to their struggle, a list whose 'énumération irait à l'infini [enumeration would stretch to infinity]'.⁹ The letter lists six initiatives undertaken or pursued by the French Communist Party and its deputies in the National Assembly:

- the support of Communist deputies for the abolition of forced labour and the *code de l'indigénat*;
- their sponsorship of a law to challenge the colonialist notion that African lands are 'terres vacantes et sans maîtres [vacant lands without owners]';
- their unstinting opposition to the attempt by the colonialists – under the leadership of Durand-Reville¹⁰ – to reintroduce forced labour. The struggle of

⁷ Um Nyobé, 'Ce que veut le peuple camerounais', memoir and documents submitted to the Fourth Commission of the UN General Assembly, 17-18 December 1952. Quoted in Atangana 1998, p. 63.

⁸ The 1955 UN mission to French Cameroon estimated that it received 40,000 communications, 90% from UPC sources. During 1954-55 the Trusteeship Council received approx 15,000 petitions, most of them from the UPC or its affiliates. In 1956 it received 33,026, 95% from UPC sources. Quoted in Le Vine 1964, p. 284.

⁹ 'Adresse du comité directeur de l'Union des Populations du Cameroun au XIIIe congrès du parti communiste français', nd., Archives Nationales d'Outremer, Aix-en Provence, Boîte FM 1 aff/pol/3335.

¹⁰ Luc Durand-Reville represented the Gabon and led the settler reaction to the attempt to legislate a *code de travail* for the Union. He proposed that the regulation of work be largely left to the individual colonies since it was

the Indigenous workers found ‘un appui total [total support]’ on the part of the Communist deputies in all the French assemblies;

- their support for the revision of the salaries of Indigenous public servants so that they would equal those of the French;
- wide-ranging support for the UPC in its interventions at the UN (in obtaining American visas for the UPC representatives for example) and in protesting the violent repression of their movement at Foumban and elsewhere.

Finally the letter applauds the PCF’s condemnation of the ‘sale guerre’ in Indochina, despite suffering reprisals from the ‘gouvernements colonialistes qui se succèdent en France depuis 1947 [colonialist governments who have succeeded each other in France since 1947]’, the year in which the PCF ministers were excluded from government.

Declaring the PCF ‘le seul parti politique de France qui reconnaît sans équivoque le droit (sic) des Peuples coloniaux à disposer d’eux-mêmes [the only political party in France which recognises unequivocally the right of colonial Peoples to self-determination]’, the letter nevertheless declares that their attendance at the Congress is intended ‘ni pour donner son adhésion au Parti communiste, ni pour recevoir les consignes ou mots d’ordre comme peuvent le prétendre les personnes mal intentionnées [neither to pledge loyalty to the communist party nor to receive instructions or watchwords as ill-disposed people may claim]’. Thomas Sharp describes the relationship of the UPC with the PCF as one of ‘pragmatic engagement’ that offered the party access to a metropolitan and international audience (Sharp 2013, p. 82).

L’Humanité drew attention to the situation in Cameroon with a regular column from 1953 entitled ‘Que se passe-t-il au Cameroun?’ (Michel 1999, p. 234). It denounced throughout June 1955 the ferocity of the repression that followed the events of May 1955 and the indiscriminate imprisonment of activists. The latter were in many cases defended by local and French communist lawyers who reported to the paper on the obstacles that were placed in their path, such as being refused permission to view their clients’ dossiers or to participate in the police interviews.¹¹ Ultimately, however, UPC links with the PCF were fraught with ambiguity and disappointment. Correspondence between the UPC and Louis Odru¹² (communist member of the Assembly of the *Union Française*) in 1955-56 reveals the growing disillusionment of the UPC with the PCF.¹³ In the first letter in the series dated 30 March 1955, UPC president Félix Moumié thanks Odru for the intervention in the National Assembly of Charles Benoist, PCF deputy for Seine-et-Oise, denouncing the repression of the UPC. Moumié declares ‘notre indéfectible attachement à la cause de votre parti [our unwavering attachment to the cause of your party]’. In a letter to Moumié dated 2 May 1955, Odru complains, however, that the UPC had given incorrect information about events in Bafoussam and Meaganga, information that had been published in *L’Humanité*.¹⁴

‘absurd’ to apply the same regulations to white settlers and ‘the still savage tribes of the most backward countries of the equatorial forest’. Quoted in Cooper 1996, pp. 292-93.

¹¹ ‘La terreur s’accroît au Cameroun’, *L’Humanité*, 25 September 1955.

¹² Member of the Colonial Section of the PCF from 1949, he travelled several times to French Africa.

¹³ Félix Moumié, président de l’UPC, à Louis Odru, conseiller à l’Assemblée de l’Union française. 30 March 1955. Archives du PCF, Archives départementales de la Seine-Saint-Denis, Boîte 261 J732/Afr Noire 32.

¹⁴ Louis Odru à Félix Moumié. 2 May 1955. Archives PCF, Archives départementales de la Seine-Saint-Denis, Boîte 261 J732/Afr Noire 32.

In the French legislative elections of 2 January 1956, the communists re-emerged as the largest party. Although it did not enter into a coalition, the PCF at first supported the government of Guy Mollet (SFIO). In a letter dated 25 January 1956, the UPC political bureau issued a 'declaration' in the aftermath of the elections, complaining that since the elections there has been no reference to the 'problème kamerunais'.¹⁵ Is that, the letter asks rhetorically, because 'le sang ne coule pas? [no blood is flowing?].' The declaration expresses the fear that the PCF is too close to the socialists, who have been responsible for the 'divers massacres dans leur pays dans le but d'étouffer leurs aspirations [various massacres in their country with the aim of smothering their aspirations]'. It calls on the PCF to recognise the acuteness of the danger that the UPC faces, in light of the crimes committed overseas by successive French governments since 1947.¹⁶ But it nevertheless affirms the UPC's desire to negotiate a peaceful agreement with France.

In its reply dated 4 April 1956 (unsigned), the PCF cites the actions its deputies have taken in defence of the UPC: demands for a parliamentary inquiry into the events of May 1955 (rejected); for the abrogation of the dissolution of the party; and amnesty for the prisoners arrested in May 1955.¹⁷ It is noteworthy, however, that not only is no mention made of the UPC's key demand for independence but the PCF salutes the proposed *loi-cadre* (passed in June 1956) as a sign of progress.¹⁸ In the final letter in the series dated 15 May, the UPC, replying to the April letter and responding no doubt to news of the PCF's vote in favour of the Special Powers Act that gave the army extensive powers in Algeria (March 1956), protests that it is kept in ignorance of the initiatives taken by the PCF on its behalf.¹⁹ It accuses the party of having the same prejudices as the colonialists 'et de se compromettre avec Guy Mollet en vue de former un Front populaire [and of compromising with Guy Mollet with the aim of forming a Popular Front]'.

Forced to pursue their struggle clandestinely, UPC leaders moved to British Cameroon or went into the forests; after some hesitation and internal discussion and dissension, from December 1956 they began to organise guerrilla activity. As Richard Joseph notes, there was a gap of nineteen months between the banning of the party and the resort to guerrilla activity, a period during which the party attempted to regain its right to participate in the democratic process (Joseph 1986, p. 358). The decision to resort to guerrilla activity must be understood in the light of the ongoing repression and the UPC leaders increasing disillusionment with the likelihood of external intervention, whether from the UN, from the broader international community or from the left in France, including the PCF. The correspondence between the PCF and the UPC analysed above relates precisely to this period. As Sharp shows, the UPC sought in those nineteenth months to raise international attention through a variety of political channels – only when this tactic failed did they resort to violence, to try to impose a

¹⁵ In 1955 the political bureau consisted of Um Nyobé General Secretary, Félix Moumié President, Abel Kingué and Ernest Ouandié Vice-Presidents. Déclaration du Bureau politique de l'UPC au PCF. 25 January 1956. Archives PCF, Archives départementales de la Seine-Saint-Denis, Boîte 261 J732/Afr Noire 32.

¹⁶ 'Les gouvernements qui se sont succédés depuis 1947 ont tellement commis de crimes outremer qu'il est temps pour le prochain gouvernement de saisir l'acuité d'un tel danger et lui trouver le remède qui s'impose.'

¹⁷ Parti communiste français à l'UPC. Unsigned. 4 April 1956. By now the UPC was operating clandestinely. Archives PCF, Archives départementales de la Seine-Saint-Denis, Boîte 261 J732/Afr Noire 32.

¹⁸ According to the *loi-cadre* the French government retained control over foreign affairs, the police, defence, customs, financial and monetary affairs and higher education.

¹⁹ The letter, with the UPC *en tête*, is neither addressed nor signed, but was clearly written in response to the letter of 4 April. Archives PCF, Archives départementales de la Seine-Saint-Denis, Boîte 261 J732/Afr Noire 32.

boycott of elections from which they were excluded (2013, p. 77). Indeed, until November 1958, Sharp argues, the sporadic use of violence was ‘significantly determined by developments within the United Nations’ (p. 97). In the crucial year 1958, as France manoeuvred towards granting Cameroon an independence that would keep the nation within the francosphere, the PCF was, perhaps inevitably, increasingly focused on the situation in Algeria, the repercussions of which on life and politics in France were so dramatic and immediate. The Senegalese nationalist intellectual Amady Aly Dieng, briefly member of the PCF in 1958-59, criticised the ‘total silence on African problems’ in the pages of *L’Humanité* (Dieng 2011, p. 106). When Raymond Barbé, formerly responsible for the Colonial Section of the PCF, visited Cameroon in mid-May 1958, he met Ahidjo and the moderate nationalist Soppo Priso, but no representative of the UPC that of course was now a clandestine movement (Deltombe et al 2011, p. 334).

The Role of the UN

The UN periodically sent missions to Cameroon to report on the progress being made towards self-government and the general conditions in the country. France sought to ensure that the most favourable impression would be made by closely controlling the conditions in which the visits took place, including ensuring that political prisoners were ‘provisionally removed’ from the capital (Deltombe et al 2011, p. 330). The members of the mission reflected the make-up of the *Conseil de tutelle*: half were representatives of the countries responsible for the territories *sous tutelle*; half were appointed or elected by the General Assembly.²⁰ Western dominance of the UN in the 1950s thus ensured that the majority would be sympathetic to French arguments and Cold War loyalties.

The demands for independence put forward by Ruben Um Nyobé at the UN in 1952, 1953 and 1954 were countered by the French who ensured that local representatives loyal to their rule also spoke at the Assembly, and in public fora and private lobbying insisted that the UPC was the creation of the external agitators of international communism. Thus in 1952, at the IVth Commission, the French delegation in New York sent a coded telegram to the High Commission in Cameroon:

Pour empêcher l’adoption d’une résolution engageant l’avenir, il reste que j’ai dû, discrètement en public et avec beaucoup plus d’insistance dans les conversations privées, affirmer le caractère pro-communiste de l’UPC [To prevent the adoption of a resolution that might be binding on the future, I have had, discretely in public and with much greater insistence in private conversations, to declare the pro-communist character of the UPC] (quoted in Um Nyobé 1984, p. 57).

The official French response of 6 December 1955 to the petitions received by the UN concerning the events of May 1955, justified banning the UPC since it was a ‘totalitarian’ and ‘xenophobic’ party, a ‘mouvement révolutionnaire d’un type devenu classique [revolutionary movement of a classic kind]’.²¹ The success of France’s characterisation of the UPC can be seen in the report of the UN Mission that, after visiting Cameroon in March 1956, approved the banning of the UPC and its youth and women’s wings since their members ‘tentent de répandre une doctrine inspirée du

²⁰ <http://www.un.org/fr/documents/charter/chap13.shtml>.

²¹ Pétitions concernant le Cameroun sous Administration française. Observations du Gouvernement français en tant qu’autorité administrative. ONU. DOC. TOBS. 5/71 (6 décembre 1955), pp. 9-12.

communisme [attempt to spread a doctrine inspired by communism]’.²² Reflecting on the reasons for the failure of the UPC to win power, Pierre Messmer, who was High Commissioner of Cameroon from April 1956 until the end of January 1958, notes the lack of external political or material support it received and the hostility of the UN towards its demands: ‘L’ONU (...) n’a jamais réservé bon accueil aux pétitionnaires upécistes, très marqués par leur adhésion au communisme, en des temps de guerre froide [The UN (...) never gave a good reception to the UPC petitioners, strongly characterised by their adherence to communism, in the Cold War period]’ (Messmer 1998, p. 126). Messmer does not add that it was the French who ensured that the UPC would be characterised in this way.

The French press, from the right-wing papers to *Combat* on the left, writes Marc Michel, echoed the French government perspective, presenting the UPC “à travers les lunettes de l’anti-communisme [through anti-communist lenses].”²³ The characterisation of the UPC promoted by the French authorities was widely adopted by the international press too. Even newspapers that might be considered sympathetic to the cause of decolonisation, such as the *Manchester Guardian* in the UK, tended to characterise the UPC as ‘communist-inspired’ or ‘communist-affiliated’.²⁴

The Cold War was a crucial factor in explaining the latitude accorded to France by the Western bloc powers, West and Central Africa having been in effect ceded to French influence to counter the communist threat. The overall tendency of US policy in the post-war period, notes Peter Schraeder, was to see Africa as ‘a special area of influence and responsibility of the former European colonial powers’ in a context where US policy-makers tended ‘to view Africa from an East-West perspective’ (Schraeder 1994, p. 14, p. 15). In his report to the UN Trustee Council in February 1955, the American representative, Mason Sears, praised France’s administration of the colony and expressed the hope that, in its evolution towards ‘autonomy’ (he did not use the term ‘independence’), the Cameroonians would retain ‘les liens les plus étroits [the closest of ties]’ with France (‘Le Conseil de tutelle’, 1955). The Western bloc countries consistently voted to refuse UPC demands at the UN, turned a blind eye to French military intervention, and ignored the fact that Trustees did not have the right to ban political parties.

In the context of the Cold War, the accusation of communist affiliation was sufficient to distance even some of the non-aligned countries from supporting the demands of a movement that had been tainted in this way at the UN (Deltombe et al. 2011, p. 333). On 9 March 1959, in the first round of voting at the UN on the terms of Cameroon’s independence, which would be granted with neither new elections nor a constitution in place, most of the countries associated with the Bandung movement abstained rather than voting against. Even the communist bloc abstained in the final vote on 10 March, reflecting the Soviet Union’s preoccupation with preventing the new African nations from falling into the American camp. The French were thus able to ensure that independence was granted on terms favourable to them, with a president whose rise to power they had overseen, Ahmadou Ahidjo, and with the often secret technical, military and economic agreements in place that protected French geopolitical and

²² ‘Un rapport de l’ONU sur le Cameroun’, *Le Monde*, 9 March 1956.

²³ Marc Michel, ‘Une Décolonisation confisquée? Perspectives sur la décolonisation du Cameroun sous tutelle de la France 1955-1960,’ *Revue française d’histoire d’outre-mer* 86, no. 324-25 (1999), 233.

²⁴ See for example the description of the clashes in Douala in May 1955 as ‘Communist-incited,’ in ‘Riots in French Cameroons,’ *Manchester Guardian*, 28 May 1955, p. 11. The newspaper is drawing on a Reuter report.

economic interests. On independence, only the governments of Ghana, Guinea and China explicitly recognised the UPC as the legitimate government of Cameroon.²⁵

Conclusion

The aim of this article has not been to assess whether the UPC was indeed a communist front, as the French authorities alleged, but to explore how the major players in the conflict around decolonisation were able to draw on the forces, allies and rationales thrown up by East-West confrontation. Some did so with greater success than others. Deltombe et al conclude that 'l'instrumentalisation des clivages de la guerre froide profite davantage à la France qu'à l'UPC [the instrumentalisation of Cold War divisions is more advantageous to France than to the UPC] (Deltombe et al. 2011, p. 334). While a range of political and military factors, impossible to explore here, contributed to the UPC's failure to impose its policies on the form of independence, the movement was the victim, too, of the particular conjuncture of interests of the metropolitan and international communist movement.

Whereas the UPC hoped and expected that the PCF would support their demands, the French party was preoccupied with the recovery of French status, and, under the sway of the USSR's geopolitical interests, with trying to limit the spread of American 'imperialism'. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the policy of the URSS towards nationalist movements was underpinned by Stalin's theory that the colonies had no potential for socialist revolution; their emancipation would follow only in the wake of the action of the proletariat in the imperial countries; the Kremlin's attitude towards the African nationalist leaders, dismissed as belonging to the 'national bourgeoisie', was 'ideological, dogmatic and contemptuous' (Bartenev 2007, p. 65). These positions were reflected in the PCF's attitude towards anti-colonial struggle in Cameroon: it denounced the violence of the repression of the UPC and yet did not envisage independence for the colony, for this would have run counter to both its own national and Soviet policy and interests.

In 1955-56 a new strategy was developed under Khrushchev: with the apparent stabilisation of the geopolitical order on the European continent, the growing movement for decolonisation created new opportunities for the superpowers to seek to extend their global influence. The Bandung conference of 1955 showed the Soviet leadership that it risked falling behind in the race to influence the new bloc of non-aligned nations and the countries that were moving towards independence. They did not, however, want to provoke the West and risk the stabilisation in Europe by direct intervention. Rather, 'il semblait plus rationnel aux yeux de Khrouchtchev de gagner les sympathies des régimes existants, d'établir avec eux des relations régulières et de leur montrer comment l'amitié avec la patrie du socialisme pourrait faciliter leur développement en tant que pays indépendants [it seemed more rational in Khrushchev's eyes to win the sympathy of existing regimes, to establish normal relations with them and to show them how friendship with the home of socialism could facilitate their development as independent countries]' (Bartenev 2007, p. 67). We can surely see in this policy the reasons for the abstention of the socialist bloc in the vote on Cameroon's independence at the UN in 1959, and for the presence of the Soviet Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs, Nikolai Firoubine, at the independence ceremony on 1 January

²⁵ China trained UPC guerrilla fighters in Ghana until the overthrow of Nkrumah in 1966 (Shinn and Eisenman 2012, p. 287).

1960 (Blanchet 1960, p. 5). The Soviet Union recognised Ahidjo's regime in March 1964 and invited Ahidjo on an official visit soon after.

Félix Moumié, who had succeeded Um Nyobé after the latter was killed in September 1958, intervened in many anti-colonialist international fora and campaigned for money and support, including from Russia and China, until his assassination by French secret agent William Bechtel in Geneva in November 1960. Having lost some of its most brilliant leaders, the nomadic UPC leadership in exile was increasingly beset by internal divisions and personal rivalries. At odds amongst themselves in divisions fostered by the Sino-Soviet split,²⁶ the exiled leaders became an increasing burden and embarrassment to their hosts, while the poorly equipped guerrilla fighters within the country were gradually reduced to isolated bands at the mercy of hunger and betrayal. Ahmadou Ahidjo (1960-1982), relying on the political and military support of France to combat the rebels, was able to set up an authoritarian regime in the name of the fight against communist subversion. The Republic of Cameroon, reunited with Southern Cameroon in 1961, remains today the 'pillar' of *Françafrique*, the nation with which France has the 'best relations', with Ahidjo's successor Paul Biya (1982-present) as its elder statesman.²⁷

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²⁶ The *Comité révolutionnaire*, the pro-Soviet group formed in 1961 and led by Ernest Ouandié, had closer ties with the PCF; the pro-Chinese faction, the *Comité directeur*, was led by Osendé Afana. Separate delegations – one pro-Soviet led by Ouandié, the second pro-Chinese led by Kingué—attended the 6th session of the Afro-Asian Solidarity Council, held in Algiers in March 1964.

²⁷ This description is used by François Fillon for example, quoted in Jeudy 2009.

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